Former leader of Hong Kong pro-independence group found guilty of secession

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A Hong Kong court ruled on Wednesday that the former leader of pro-independence group Studentlocalism was guilty of secession under the city's sweeping national security law, as well as money laundering, following a plea bargain with the prosecution.

Tony Chung, 20, was charged with the offences in October last year and denied bail. Local media reported at the time he was taken away along with two others from a coffee shop close to the U.S. consulate by unidentified men and was believed to be preparing for an asylum application.

Chung entered a plea bargain, admitting guilt on the charge of secession and one count of money laundering and pleading not guilty to a sedition charge and another money laundering accusation.

Prosecutor Ivan Cheung said he acted as an administrator for the Facebook pages of the U.S. branch of Studentlocalism and an organisation called the Initiative Independence Party.

Pro-independence T-shirts, flags and books were also seized from his home, the prosecutor said. The money laundering charge is related to donations he received via PayPal.

“I have a clear conscience,” Chung said in his plea.

District Court Judge Stanley Chan said the sentence will be announced on Nov. 23.

Like other anti-government organisations, Studentlocalism disbanded before Beijing imposed the security law in June 2020, to punish anything it deems as subversion, secession, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces with up to life in prison.

The vast majority of Hong Kong people do not support independence, but any mention of the idea is anathema to Beijing.

Since the enactment of the law, Hong Kong has taken a swift authoritarian turn, with most democratic politicians now in jail or in self-exile, dozens of civil society organisations folding, and international rights groups leaving the city.

Chinese and Hong Kong authorities deny the security law tramples individual rights and say the legislation was necessary to restore stability after mass protests in 2019 when millions took to the streets over many months.

The former British colony returned to Chinese rule in 1997 with the promise of a high degree of autonomy, which democracy activists and Western governments say was broken -- an allegation China vehemently denies.